

# Lights, Camera, Action: Producing Your Documentary

In this unit, you and a group of your classmates will use your research information to create your own documentary—an informative, nonfiction video that explores and analyzes real world issues. Your topics can range from the problems of tourism to animal abuse, but it must be something relevant to life in this town or state.

## REQUIREMENTS:

### Preproduction:

Planner	10 pts
Pitch	10 pts
Script	30 pts
Storyboard	20 pts
Interview ?s	10 pts

### Production: (75 pts)

Opening/Closing credits  
Variety of shots  
Expert and on-the-street interviews  
Develops/supports a clear argument  
Uses B Roll material to support ideas  
Clearly relates topic to audience  
Offers solutions or call to action

## PREPRODUCTION:

Just as with any essay, the first steps in creating your documentary involve RAP: Role, Audience Purpose. The latter is fairly simple—your intent is to inform and persuade. Audience, you’ll need to decide upon: Who do you want to convince—your peers? A specific group? Young children? Role is a bit more tricky. Do you want to appear as an expert on the issue, or as a concerned citizen trying to find the answers? Are you “on the attack” to expose corruption and bad practice? Or are you the objective observer, just presenting the facts? These considerations will determine how you present your information to your audience.

**Know Your Limits:** While you may have dreams of writing for National Geographic or Discovery, the reality is you’re a high school student! This doesn’t mean you can’t achieve a powerful and meaningful piece of video. You can! But you need to remember to work within the framework of the assignment. This is only a 10 minute piece of video, so, focus, focus, focus that topic. Not “animal abuse,” but “bad habitats in the local zoo”; not “protecting the oceans” but “protecting (insert local river/bay)”. Be careful not to overpack your time with too much information. Select a few main points and key interviews rather than dealing with minutiae. Remember, too, that you don’t have professional editing equipment. Don’t plan incredible segues and technical effects that you can’t achieve.

Once you’ve focused your topic, think about the audience again. What do you want them to learn from your video? What attitude do you want them leaving with? How will you make your information engaging and appealing? No one wants to sit and watch a 10 minute video of a chart! You need to:

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- 1) Engage your audience's emotions. Include footage that shows the human side of your issue. If your documentary is about begging on the streets of New York, you need to show both the beggars pleading for money AND tourists besieged by children asking for handouts. Show HUMAN joy and HUMAN pain.
- 2) Make your audience care about the subject. Your documentary should relate directly to the lives of your audience. Otherwise, why should they care? Be sure to DIRECTLY connect the information to your viewers' experience, either through personal interviews or footage. Let them share in your experience as you search for answers to your questions. One way of doing this is to tell a story, as you see in many of the popular documentaries such as *Spellbound* or *WalMart: The High Cost of Low Price*. These films tell a big story by focusing on the topic's effect on a few people, giving the story immediacy and emotional impact.
- 3) Interviews will also put a human face on your subject. Before you begin taping, plan exactly what you want to SHOW your audience and what you want to TELL them. Who will you interview? You'll need both "experts" and "man-on-the street" interviews. Before you decide to interview someone, consider (a) is this person knowledgeable about the topic, either through personal experience or through being associated with it? b) Is the source primary or secondary? i.e. is the information from personal experience or through study? c) Is the person a RELIABLE source? What are his/her qualifications, how closely is s/he associated with the issue? Is there any sort of bias? We'll talk about interview techniques/etiquette separately.

**Show and Tell:** OK, so you've done the research (and completed your research guide), now you need to pull it all together. Really, a documentary is the visual version of a persuasive speech—outline your "argument" and evidence in the most compelling order. In addition, you must decide which information to provide directly through interviews and which to discuss as "voice-overs." What footage will you use to accompany the voice-overs? What will you use in your B-Roll? (These are the still photos, digitized documents, and extra footage to support/develop your main points.)

### **The Pitch:**

Now, write a one page summary of your ideas (called a "treatment") to sell me and your classmates on the project. Explain what you want your documentary to achieve and why. How will you convince your audience and deepen their understanding of the issues? Remember the persuasive structure: State the problem

Show why it's a problem

Call to action

This summary will also guide you as you develop your storyboard and script.

### **The Script:**

Now, you need to write your script/screenplay, which will consist of several scenes, each about 5-15 seconds long. Any longer, and a scene becomes boring to watch. So, do the math. In a 10 minute video, with an average of 8 second scenes, how many scenes will you have? You'll need to plan/write for each one. You should also avoid long segments of interviews on screen. Show enough to establish who is

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speaking, then try to incorporate B-roll footage of what the person is talking about, using the speaker's comments as voice-over narration.

Include scene directions, camera directions, quotations from interviews, etc. The script should resemble your final documentary almost EXACTLY. (see sample) Directions for the scene are in italics, narration and dialogue in normal typeface, technical terms in are italic bold.

You should take the following into consideration as you write:

**WORDS:** Use a conversational style with short, concise sentences.

Identify the subject for the audience. e.g. the topic, the people you are interviewing, etc.

Provide background information (statistics, facts, etc.) that can't be shown on screen

Use words to transition from one scene to the next

Explain on-screen action that isn't obvious to your viewer

**VISUALS:** Show speakers to establish identification

Combine a variety of shots—e.g. wide angles and close-ups

Signal scene transitions by using zoom or fade out/in.

### **The Storyboard:**

Once your script is finished, create the storyboard—a series of sketches of key scenes with notes on visuals, narration, dialogue and music. . When finished, it looks somewhat like a comic book or (very short!) graphic novel. Your storyboard shows the progression of your documentary from the first scene to closing credits. Each scene will eventually become a shot in your documentary, with visuals as well as notes. The storyboard should express both the action and the emotions in enough detail that someone else could shoot the video and achieve mostly the effect for which you're aiming. As far as the sketching itself, I don't expect Michelangelo here! If, like me, stick figures are a challenge for you, that's good enough. This is just a rough sketch to help you plan out your scenes before taping.

### **PRODUCTION:**

Gather all the equipment: camera, tape, microphones. Make sure every member of your group knows how to use the camera. You may want to have one person in charge of taking care of equipment. In fact, if one person in the group is especially good with the camera, it's fine to put that person in charge of taping the entire documentary.

When filming, take advantage of "local color" shots. Try to go "on location" and vary your shots to include live action, stills and close up, medium and wide angle shots. If you can find or borrow one, use a tripod to steady the camera! We don't want any Blair Witch stuff with the audience vomiting in the aisles!

Make sure the documentary includes credits: show the name of each member of the group and how they contributed. (e.g. narrator, cameraperson, set designer, etc.) You will also need to cite sources for any images, music or other material you use that you didn't create yourself.

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## **POSTPRODUCTION/EDITING:**

Once you've shot the documentary, you may still be able to make changes if you have film-editing capabilities on your computer. Preview the film and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What is my main point? Does every scene relate to that point and develop it in some way?
- 2) Does any of the narration seem too obvious? Is there too much narration? Too little?
- 3) Are all of the shots clear and easy to follow? Are any jerky or out of focus? If I use music, does it stay in the background or is it hard to hear the narration? Are my interview subjects easy to hear? If not, add text for your audience to read what they're saying.

Now, don't panic. Through each stage of the process we'll discuss these issues in considerable detail, with even more handouts (lucky you!) and plenty of practice.

### **Due dates:**

Planner:

Research Outline:

Interview Questions:

Pitch:

Script:

RD:

FD:

Storyboard:

Final Product:

RD:

FD:

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# SCRIPT EXAMPLE

## MUN: Road to Peace

OPENING SCENES (Intro): *Photo montage of different UN-type crises, with title shots of war, famine, etc. Cross dissolve between shots. **Soundtrack:** foreboding note, growing louder. Builds to TITLE “What Can You Do?” with Transition to MUN/Logo title as the “answer.*

SCENE 1: (Background) *Picture of Kofi Annan with quotation about UN*

*Pictures of UN Headquarters, Egypt signing HR, etc . **Sound: theme music***

NARRATOR: (*voice over photos--intro*) As world problems grow more and more pressing, the United Nations’ importance increases proportionately. Created after WWII from the ruins of the League of Nations, the UN acted as an international alliance for promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts, upholding respect for human rights, and coordinating international efforts to solve economic, cultural and social problems among its 191 member nations

The UN believes that it’s in the best interest of all nations to settle international disputes by diplomatic means, through negotiation and discussion. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with, or can live up to, this standard of peace; nor, as recent events demonstrate, is it a matter of conflict between developed and developing nations. It is a matter of education: of learning to value the negotiation process and taking the time to practice the skills necessary to resolve complex issues diplomatically.

SCENE 2: *Pictures of kids at MUN Conferences. FX: Ken Burns Effect*

**Sound: theme music**

NARRATOR: The Model United Nations, with conferences and members from around the world, not only provides students with the knowledge of current global issues—ranging from the Iraq war to internet privacy—it helps them to think globally, recognizing the complexity of international dilemmas.

ROODVOETS INTERVIEW –what kids learn.

ERIN’S Interview—what I learned.

SCENE THREE: (*first point—It’s hard work*) *Medium shot of Erin taking notes from journals and books. Cut to medium shot of kids at computer. Cut to medium shot of discussion during meeting. **Sound: theme music***

NARRATOR: Don’t kid yourself that MUN is easy or a great excuse for a shopping trip! Once you’re assigned a country and an issue, you’ll work hard to earn your spot on the international

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conferencess, spending hours researching in the library and on the internet. In meetings you'll practice debating and speech-making, learn to write resolutions and work with fellow delegates to shape your country's policy. The better prepared you are, the better your conference will be!

BASSEM Interview—boring not being prepared!

SCENE 4: *(second point: Conferences are busy)* Photos of delegates in action. Cross dissolve between photos. . **Sound: theme music**

NARRATOR: Once the conference begins, you'll have a great time meeting other delegates from all over the world and exchanging ideas with them. An MUN conference is an intense experience: you are on the go from 8 in the morning until 5 in the afternoon, often with evening activities also scheduled! At the conference you'll merge with other countries to improve your resolution, you'll debate issues in committee, speak for and against resolutions and basically spend three to five days arguing global issues and having the time of your life!

MAY'S INTERVIEW: Egypt and computers

SHERIF INTERVIEW: First conference jitters

SCENE 5: *(point three: It's fun!)* FX: Map with planes going to Singapore, Russia. Dissolve to shots of tourist sites, kids eating, Natalie with frog's leg and shopping. FX: Last shot, fade to black. **Sound: theme music**

NARRATOR: You'll have the opportunity to attend conferences here in Cairo, or abroad in Abu Dhabi, Russia and Singapore. Of course, you'll have a chance to get out and explore a bit, too, visiting historical sites, exploring museums and experiencing the local cuisine. Attend the ballet in Russia and tour the world famous Hermitage museum. Or try your first frog's leg in Singapore's Chinatown. And, yes, we try to give you at least one afternoon to shop wherever the conference is!

SCENE 6: *(conclusion)* Photos of kids' together. End on group shot. Cross dissolve. FX: Fade to black. **Sound: Theme music**

NARRATOR: Whether you're Angola or America, Zambia or Zaire, Model United Nations offers the chance to look at global problems from a different perspective. And while you may not end poverty or feed the world, with a better understanding of international trials and tribulations, you're one step closer to a more peaceful world.

END CREDITS

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## TERMS:

Close up:	A camera shot equivalent to showing the head of a person
Full shot:	A camera shot equivalent to showing a person's body.
Medium shot:	A camera shot that shows a person from waist up—good for dialogue.
Wide shot:	A long camera shot that establishes the setting of the scene
Cut:	Instant change from one scene to the next.
Fade-in:	Scene begins as black , then slowly appears.
Fade out:	Scene slowly disappears to black
Shot:	The frame of a video.
FX:	Sound or other effect added to a video to enhance a scene.
Stills:	Photographs/charts, etc. used in a video
Voice-over:	Narration that is dubbed over live action or stills.
Zoom:	Camera movement toward or away from the subject.
Rough cut:	Like the rough draft of a paper. The clips are in order, but you haven't added the fx, sound, titles, etc.
Final cut:	Completed version, ready for publishing.

Names:

## PLANNER

**TOPIC:**

**FOCUS:**

**AUDIENCE:**

**BIG IDEA:** What's the main point you want the video to make? Limit this to no more than two sentences. (In other words, what's your THESIS??)

**VISUALS:** List at least 3 images you can tape to support/SHOW your BI .

Image

Relevance to topic

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**INTERVIEWS:** Who can you talk to to support your main idea?

## Who?

Why? (how will they convince your audience?)

Expert:

On the Street:

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**SO WHAT:** List at least 3 *significant* ways this issue affects your audience. ( If it doesn't, you need either a new issue or a new audience!)

1.

2.

3.

For each point, explain how you plan to make that point clear to your audience?

1.

2.

3.

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**CALL TO ACTION:** What do you want your audience to do and why? Describe at least TWO actions and describe what they will accomplish.

Action One:

Action Two.

How will you explain this to them?

Visuals

Commentary

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Now that you have everything planned out and know the content of your documentary, it's time to think about your opening—this first minute needs to be strong and thought provoking if you want to grab your viewer's interest.

**HOOK:** What opening scene will grab your viewers' attention and introduce the topic?

Image

Commentary

**CLOSING SHOT:** How can you end your documentary in a memorable way? Link to your audience!

Image

Commentary

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## Research Guide:

- 1) List at least FIVE sources in appropriate MLA format. At least TWO of these should be books or magazines, etc.

a.

b

c

d

e

- 2) At this point, list three problems related to your issue. For each one, find at least two facts or statistics or one quotation from an expert that supports your analysis. Write the citation information.

A.

1)

2)

B.

1)

2)

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C.

1)

2)

3). Does your research suggest there might be other problems, too? What are they?

4) What are contributing factors? Cite your sources.

5) What possible solutions do your sources suggest? Again for each one, write the evidence, with the citation information.

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